

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND SUFFERING

This world is full of suffering. Yet, how we understand suffering matters a great deal in determining whether suffering will be allowed to destroy our faith in God or not. Many are tempted to think that a good God who is in control of all things simply would not allow suffering to happen (especially to those who are innocent). While God certainly is in control of all things, the Bible demonstrates that there is far more to understanding suffering than this. Therefore, we must consider how to develop a more biblical view of the suffering experienced in life.

## ROMANS 8:18-25

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This passage demonstrates the present reality of living in a lost paradise (due to sin, Genesis 3). First, creation is subjected to futility (emptiness) due to its temporary nature (Ecclesiastes 1:2-11). Second, creation is now under the bondage of decay and faces the reality of death (Isaiah 40:6-8). Third, creation groans with the labor pains of sickness, suffering, and death rather than constant pain-free pleasure (Psalm 90:10). Yet, there is great hope for the one (and only the one) who loves God, when the groanings of birth pains give way to our redemption in the heavenly paradise God is preparing (Romans 8:28; Revelation 21:1-22:5)!

## JOB 1:6-22; 2:1-10

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Job was a righteous man who had been greatly blessed by God (Job 1:1-5), yet he suffered greatly. In this we learn that suffering is not always the result of some evil thing the person who suffers has done! After all, even Jesus (who was sinless, Hebrews 4:15) experienced great suffering (Isaiah 53:3; 1 Peter 2:21). This passage demonstrates that Satan wants to see people suffer so that their suffering might be used to entice them to curse God. God is also pictured in this passage as allowing Satan to put people through suffering so that their faith may be tested. Yet, even in this, God put clear limits on Satan that Satan could not cross! Therefore, rather than blaming God for the suffering you experience, you must view Satan as the

one who wants to see you experience devastation and pain!

## PROVERBS 1:24-33

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Some suffering that people experience is directly related to the sinful and/or foolish choices people they make. While God makes His wisdom known and offers blessings through it (v. 33), He gives people the choice of whether they will listen to His wisdom or not (e.g. wisdom about your speech, your relationships, your finances, your work, etc.). If you refuse to listen to His wisdom, you are warned that the consequences involve spiritual death (James 1:14-15) and physical suffering (Proverbs 5:21-23; 6:6-11; 7:6-27; James 3:14-16). Then, even though you can find forgiveness of your sin and eternal life through Jesus (Acts 2:38), turning to God after rejecting His wisdom will not erase all the physical consequences of your sin and foolishness!

## 1 JOHN 3:11-12

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This text references Cain killing Abel (Genesis 4:1-8) and identifies why Abel suffered in this way. Namely, the text says that Cain was of the evil one (Satan) and, therefore, chose to murder his brother. Like Cain, those who allow the devil to influence their thinking, decisions, speech, and actions will bring undue suffering on both their own lives (as in the previous point) and on others (e.g. abuse, financial hardships, injuries, divorce, bullying, anger, etc.). The devil works to breed sin and foolishness that leads to more suffering in the world than there needs to be (1 John 5:19)! Some of this is even accomplished through sinful and foolish ways being passed down through generations as patterns of learned behavior (1 Peter 1:18).

## HEBREWS 12:5-11

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Although not all suffering is due to sin being present in a person's life, there are times when God disciplines through suffering due to sin (Psalm 119:67). God does this, however, to bring about repentance in that person's life. For example, God disciplined King David for his adultery and murder so that he would lose his son, experience division in his household, and experience trouble throughout his reign (2 Samuel 11-12). God disciplined Jonah for rebelliously fleeing from where God told him to go by

causing a great fish to swallow him (Jonah 1-2). Whenever someone experiences suffering, therefore, they should use it as a point of self-examination to see if there is any unrepented sin God may be disciplining them for.

### JOHN 9:1-7

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As Jesus encountered this man who had been blind from birth, He faced the question of whether his blindness was due to sin that had been committed. Yet, Jesus plainly revealed that the man was not suffering due to sin that he or his parents had committed. Instead, his suffering was directly connected with the work God wanted to accomplish through him (e.g. his healing that would work to the glory of God, vv. 8-41)! As God is all-knowing, there are times when He is trying to accomplish some work in and through us that requires suffering to accomplish it (2 Corinthians 12:6-10; Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4).

### ECCLESIASTES 9:11

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People often want too much control over suffering and pain. That is, they want to have a formula that assures them of “good” (pain-free) outcomes if they do the “right” things. However, this passage shows that life under the sun often does not work that way! People are not in control of everything that happens (e.g. layoffs, cancer diagnoses, automobile accidents, natural disasters, etc.). From the perspective of life under the sun, these events can seem random and unpredictable. So, rather than trying to control them, we must do the best we can to prepare for and endure them. For, no matter what struggles you will experience and why, you should know that God will reward those who love and serve Him faithfully (Romans 8:28)!

### CONCLUSION

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You must be fair in evaluating and seeking to understand the true causes of suffering experienced in this world. Although Satan is ultimately behind the suffering that exists in the world, there are some ways in which God also is trying to use the suffering for good. Furthermore, you must recognize there are many things you cannot know and do not understand that may be involved. Therefore, commit yourself to being faithful to God through whatever suffering you experience so that you can experience His great and eternal blessings!

### DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

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How is the suffering on earth connected to sin in Genesis 3?

How is Satan involved in suffering?

In what ways can sin be blamed for suffering?

In what ways can sin not be blamed for suffering?

How can your choices bring about suffering?

How can the choices of others bring about suffering?

How does God use suffering to accomplish things that are good?

Why is it important to accept that you won't always understand the reason for suffering?

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